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"I am a freak of nature": Tourette's and the Grotesque in Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*

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> Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 66)

1 "'*Accusatony! Excusebaloney! Funnymonopoly!*' I squeezed my eyes shut to interrupt the seizure of language" (MB[1] 175). This short passage provides a significant sample of how the hero narrator's Tourette's syndrome manifests itself in Jonathan Lethem's 1999 detective novel, *Motherless Brooklyn*. "The distinctiveness" of the narrative lies in the "proliferation of Lionel's verbal tics" (Fleissner 390). While Tourette's provokes Lionel Essrog's linguistic outbursts, it breaks and intrudes upon the narrative, introducing dramatic nonsense into the text—even more dramatic when italics are used and the portmanteau words stand out on the page. They could suggest a narrator's joke, yet Tourette's is no joke. A neurological condition,[2] it combines "the presence of multiple motor tics (twitches) and one or more vocal tics (or noises)" (Robertson and Baron-Cohen 45). Oliver Sacks's approach to disabled people has been questioned by some disability specialists (Couser), however, his description of the syndrome is worthy of attention: not only is his name mentioned on the acknowledgments page of *Motherless Brooklyn* but some critics even contend that Lethem drew inspiration for the novel from Sacks:

> In 1885 Gilles de la Tourette, a pupil of Charcot, described the astonishing syndrome which now bears his name. "Tourette's Syndrome," as it was immediately dubbed, is characterised by an *excess* of nervous energy, and a great production and extravagance of strange motions and notions: tics, jerks, mannerisms, grimaces, noises, curses, involuntary imitations and compulsions of all sorts, with an odd elfin humour and a tendency to antics and outlandish kinds of play. In its "highest" forms, Tourette's syndrome involves every aspect of the affective, the instinctual and the imaginative life; in its "lower," and perhaps commoner, forms, there may be little more than abnormal movements and impulsivity, though even here there is an element of strangeness. It was well recognised and extensively reported in the

> closing years of the last century, for these were years of a spacious neurology which did not hesitate to conjoin the organic and the psychic. It was clear to Tourette, and his peers, that this syndrome was a sort of *possession* by primitive impulses and urges: but also that it was a possession with an organic base—a very definite (if undiscovered) neurological disorder. (*Man* 97, my emphasis)

While disability has been considered "bodily lack" or "loss to be compensated for" (Garland Thomson, 1997 7, 49), in contrast, talking about Tourette's as "excess," as Sacks does, suggests potential and the "extraordinary status" (Garland Thomson, 1997 xi) the syndrome may confer on the disabled person.

2 "In the years after its delineation, Tourette's tended to be seen not as an organic but as a 'moral' disease—an expression of mischievousness or weakness of the will, to be treated by rectifying the will. From the 1920s to the 1960s, it tended to be seen as a psychiatric disease, to be treated by psychoanalysis or psychotherapy; but this, on the whole, proved ineffective, too" (Sacks, 1995 78). Now that Tourette's has been recognized as a neurological condition, a novel such as Lethem's—built around a narrator protagonist with Tourette's—is identified as belonging to "a new strain within the Anglo-American novel," which Marco Roth called the "neurological novel" or "neuronovel" (2009).[3] Roth decries the development of the neuronovel by way of comparison with the genre's predecessors, particularly the stream of consciousness writers of the Modernist period like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. "The mind [has] become the brain," Roth writes. According to him, the shift from mind to brain goes hand in hand with a shift from psychoanalysis to neuroscience, and allows neuroscience to prevail and account for almost any condition.

3 The development of neuroscience has been unprecedented in the last thirty years: the 1990s were proclaimed the "Decade of the Brain" in the United States by George H. W. Bush in July 1990, thus fostering interest and funding in brain research (Burn 168). Articles in the press, films[4] and neuro-literature have also contributed to the public's information so that even relatively rare neurological disorders and their names, like Tourette's, are more familiar today than ever before. According to Bent Sørensen, "this greater awareness and label dissemination indicate that a popularisation of [...] terminology has taken place, and that these labels have entered a wider cultural field. The reason for this could be that we now like to mirror ourselves in the various offerings of available [disability] images" (Sørensen 2).

4 However, contrary to what Roth contends, neuroscientific discourse is hardly present in *Motherless Brooklyn*. The narrator only identifies his disorder as an adolescent when he is offered a book entitled "*Understanding Tourette's Syndrome*"[5] (MB 81), and never seems to consult any doctor, let alone a neurologist—even though he takes chemicals such as "Haldol, Klonopin, and Orap" for a while (MB 82-83). Despite the allusion to "obsessive-compulsive symptoms" (MB 15), Tourette's is hardly evoked scientifically but mostly figuratively. "Perhaps metaphor begins when we find that experiences, however important or trivial, in truth do not have a name in any simple sense" (Punter 75)—a statement that can certainly be extended to comparison as well. However, even after reading the book, Lionel only quotes—or pretends to quote, through the use of quotation marks—a figurative passage that is not even original: "My constellation of behaviors was 'unique as a snowflake'" (MB 82). Not only does he seem to deny scientific language any relevance to account for his condition, but he asserts his preference for vernacular—possibly in an attempt at (re)familiarizing the anomalous syndrome.

5 A Tourettic narrator, Lionel turns into a detective to try and discover who killed his mentor, Frank Minna. While Lionel mentions the name of his syndrome on the very first page, and repeatedly refers to it throughout the narrative, his predilection for common parlance, even at times the "language of the market-place,"[6] may be the reason why he portrays himself as a freak—"Free Human Freakshow" (MB 32), "I am a *freak of nature*" (MB 265, italics in original). True, it was Frank Minna, who first labelled him a freak, but instead of rejecting the derogatory label Lionel appropriated it (MB 56, 57). In *Keywords for Disability Studies* (2015), Leonard Cassuto writes that "'freak' labels disability as a spectacle" and suggests "some of the most deplorable treatment of people with disabilities" (85). Discussing Leslie Fiedler's essentialist approach in *Freaks* (1978) and Robert Bogdan's constructionist position in *Freak Show* (1990), Cassuto concludes that "for Fiedler, the freak is the basis of the performance. For Bogdan, the performance creates the freak." In other words, according to Bogdan, "a freak is simply someone who is persuasively presented as one. The display alone [...] is what turns a human being with a peculiarity (such as a disability) into a freak" (Cassuto 85, 86). In *Motherless Brooklyn*, however, it is the Tourettic first-person narrator who presents himself as a freak and dramatically displays his recurrent tics through lexical and typographic variations in the narrative. Thus, he plays a double part: as a character, he is the freak on the freakshow platform, or the page, and as the narrator, he is the freakshow "talker" or "lecturer" (Bogdan 27) constructing the freak from his condition. Thereby, the narrative turns into a freakshow, not in the sense of the sordid spectacle of the past, but as a construction questioning both the social and the literary order.

6 Elizabeth Grosz explains that freak "is a term whose use may function as an act of defiance, a political gesture of self-determination." The freak, as a grotesque figure, is indeed "an *ambiguous* being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life" (Grosz 56, 57; italics in original). Like the "rogue, the clown and the fool" mentioned by Mikhail Bakhtin[7] in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), "[he] has a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege—the right to be 'other' in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation" (159). When Lethem's narrator calls himself a freak, he puts on a mask, "the mask of the public spectacle," to quote Bakhtin again (1981 159), and turns his disability into a "privilege." For Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Bakhtin's concept of the disorderly body as a challenge to the existing order suggests the radical potential that the disabled body as a sign for difference might possess within representation" (1997 38). The grotesque, as a liminal aesthetic category, offers the possibility of interpreting disability not just as an anomaly but also as an opportunity for a fresh view of reality.

7 Following Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque[8] in *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Lethem's narrator always uses laughter, comic exaggeration, ambivalence and transformation—not to mention his penchant for jokes and word play. He also describes in detail all his convulsive tics, obscenities, involuntary mimicry and repetitions of other's words, so that his symptoms turn into the grotesque characteristics of a freak. With a freak as leading character and narrator, the conventional genres that the novel borrows from—detective fiction and the coming-of-age novel—are destabilized: the freak mask casts doubt on the Touretter's ability to be a traditional detective, for instance. Eventually, the display of the narrator's symptoms

is a pretext for the most innovative stylistic and lexical experimentation, as shown in particular by his recurrent use of bold images. While Tourette's generates physical and social disability, it may be argued that, as excess, it also empowers literary and perhaps even cognitive ability.

The Grotesque Tourettic Narrator

8 Reading the first paragraph of *Motherless Brooklyn* is no doubt a baffling experience for any reader. The chances are that they will be confused, at least divided. The long nearly-rhyming series of metaphors—"I'm a carnival barker, an auctioneer, a downtown performance artist, a speaker in tongues, a senator drunk on filibuster" (MB 1)—may be reminiscent of an enumeration à la Whitman, yet it is also suggestive of the freakshow talker pitching an exhibit as a unique curiosity ("I am a carnival barker"). It will provoke surprise and amusement, maybe laughter, too—not at the Touretter but at the role(s) he is playing. By contrast, the far shorter, following sentence in italics—"*I've got Tourette's*"—interrupting the pitch and brutally introducing a little-known neurological condition will rather arouse fear and pity. In other words, right from the beginning, the reader is confronted with what Philip Thomson calls "a conflict in response" and "a clash between incompatible reactions—laughter on the one hand and horror [...] on the other." A similar clash is to be found in the text itself between the "gruesome or horrifying content" (the neurological disorder) and the narrator's "comic manner" (Thomson 2). This is how, on the very first page, the grotesque narrator is introduced into the diegesis, and this perplexing incipit is programmatic: it sets the tone for the narrative that follows.

9 The next sentence in the paragraph—"My mouth won't quit, [...] my Adam's apple bobbing, jaw muscle beating like a miniature heart under my cheek" (MB 1)—a list of fragmented body parts without any apparent controlling "I," suggests the organic chaos of illness. Not only does Lionel's mouth in particular seem to possess a life of its own, but it is no longer exactly a mouth ("like a miniature heart under my cheek"). Right from the beginning, the reader is given to see not only a deviant body but a "body that refuses to be governed and cannot carry out the will to self-determination" (Garland Thomson, 1996 44), in other words, the stereotype of a disabled body. And only the narrative can restore, if not order, at least some meaning. This lack of control is further highlighted by the replacement—after the brutal statement "*I've got Tourette's*" followed by "my cheek" and "my brain"—of the first-person singular by the third-person plural "they" referring to "the words," and repeated four times: "They are an invisible army on a peacekeeping mission, a peaceable horde. They mean no harm" (MB 1). The metaphor of the "army" is no casual detail, like the oxymoronic "peaceable horde." No matter how "peaceful" their purpose, the words take control or possession of the hero, who finds himself literally under siege as a consequence.

> Any disease introduces a doubleness into life—an "it" with its own needs, demands, limitations. With Tourette's, the "it" takes the form of explicit compulsion, a multitude of explicit impulsions and compulsions: one is driven to do this, to do that, against one's own will, or in deference to the alien will of the "it." [...]. Thus being "possessed" can be more than a figure of speech for an impulse disorder like Tourette's. (Sacks, 1996 78)

At the end of the opening paragraph, Lionel dramatically describes this process of possession, or rather submersion: "That's when it comes, the urge to shout in the

church, the nursery, the crowded movie house. It's an itch at first. Inconsequential. But that itch is soon a torrent behind a straining dam. Noah's flood. That itch is my whole life" (MB 2). In addition to the extended metaphor of flooding, the cataphor (the pronoun "it" comes before the noun "urge"), the jerky rhythm—with longer and shorter, even verbless, sentences—and the alliterative effects create a sense of increasing alienation. It reaches a climax with Lionel's incongruous scream "Eat me" at the end of the paragraph, which becomes "Eatmeeatmeeatme" a couple of lines further down (MB 2). Both the repeated scream and the portmanteau word that represents it could elicit laughter, if it were not for Lionel's condition. Fleissner compares Lionel's symptom with Poe's "Imp of the Perverse," a detective story, too: "the Tourettic tic in its most stereotypical form looks very much like the work of 'The Imp of the Perverse': the ticcer helplessly discharges exactly what one is not supposed to say, that is, a barrage of insults and obscenities" (Fleissner 390). Yet, in Poe's tale, the narrator confesses to a crime he committed and to the self-destructive impulses he experienced as a consequence. Lionel merely evokes an "invisible companion [named] Billy or Bailey" (MB 46) that he has known most of his life. Interestingly, the word "Bailey"—from "the Middle English *baylle*, 'wall enclosing an outer court' of a castle, fortified city, etc."—suggests confinement but "Billy," from William, involves "will" and "protection" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). The uncertain nicknames, therefore, may be more significant than first meets the eye—they create an ambivalent image of the syndrome, both stigma and asset, no matter what Lionel may say.[9]

10 Lionel is also "prone to being 'set off' [...] by verbal detritus around him that appeals to him for its rhythmic or sonic oddity" (Fleissner 390). When he is telling a joke about an octopus, for instance, the word brings about "*Pianoctamus! Pianoctamum Bailey!*" (MB 26); [10] similarly, in Maine Lionel experiences "a whole series of Maine geography tics" (MB 273). If he hears "Alfred Hitchcock," for example, silently or not he is likely to reply "Altered Houseclock" or "Ilford Hotchkiss" (MB 46)—as if he were merely playing with words and names. This sensitiveness to the wor(l)d around reveals a special connection, which Lionel clarifies when he describes Tourette's as a form of "violating the boundaries that made *man* distinct from *street*, from *world*" (MB 226, italics in original). Through Tourette's, Lionel seems to possess what Bakhtin calls a grotesque body: "contrary to modern canons the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits." Bakhtin adds that "the emphasis is on the apertures" of the body, that is, "the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it;" he then quotes "*the open mouth*, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus" (*Rabelais* 26, my emphasis). The connection between Lionel's brain and the world, the identification even of his brain with the world, is repeatedly mentioned (MB 6, 83, 311). [11] While the chemicals Lionel took for a while "dimm[ed] the world (or [his] brain—same thing) to twilight" (MB 83), Tourette's, by contrast, seems to brighten the world. In other words, the stigma is turned into a sort of superpower or "generative potential," and a whole new representation of disability is suggested, as "superabundance rather than lack" (Garland Thomson, 1997 xi).

11 This "superabundance" can be perceived both in the obsessive allusions to Lionel's condition and in the exaggeration characteristic of all his statements. For instance, "Have you noticed yet that I relate everything to my Tourette's? Yup, you guessed it, it's a tic. Counting is a symptom, but counting symptoms is also a symptom, a tic *plus*

ultra. I've got meta-Tourette's" (MB 192). Italics enhance the hyperbole and dramatize the comic effect—all the more since here Lionel is addressing the reader like the freakshow lecturer with his "exaggerated, sensationalized discourse" (Garland Thomson, 1996 5). Lionel's words also show a grotesque combination of formal ("meta-") and informal ("yup") language. Not only does he assert his mastery of both, but he bridges the gap between them as well. In other words, he disturbs linguistic categories and social conventions, thus foregrounding his freedom as a freak and a narrator.

12 In another passage, evoking the two-year period when Minna was away, he describes his personal evolution as follows: "Me, I became a walking joke, preposterous, improbable, unseeable" (MB 83). The metaphoric enumeration both suggests his ambiguous role in the novel and asserts his identity as a freak, "challenging the boundaries of the human and the coherence of what seemed to be the natural world" (Garland Thomson, 1996 3). During the love scene, or rather sex scene, with Kimmery, Lionel even compares himself with a cartoon character: "Then her hand fell lower, and mine too [...] My hand felt less like a hand than a catcher's mitt, or Mickey Mouse's hand, something vast and blunt and soft" (MB 220). This way, the love scene is denied any emotional dimension. While Henri Bergson writes that "laughter has no greater foe than emotion," here it is rather emotion that has no greater foe than laughter. At the end of the scene—when Lionel did not tic but Kimmery did with her repeated "Okay" (MB 221, 224)—he devotes a whole page to comparing himself with American cartoonist Don Martin's characters: "When I had sex with another person and my body began to convulse and move faster, my toes to curl, my eyes to roll, I felt like a Don Martin character" (MB 223). On the one hand, Kimmery's unexpected ticcing suggests that anybody, occasionally, can turn into a ticcer, thus questioning the border between illness and health, disabled and abled bodies.[12] On the other hand, the comparison asserts Lionel's ambiguous role—he looks for referents in popular fiction like comics, not in the world around—and reintroduces the grotesque and laughter into the narrative.

13 Playing a double role—as exhibited freak and narrator-exhibitor—throughout the novel, Lionel first questions the frequent assumption "that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute" (Garland Thomson, 1997 12). He also unsettles semantic categories. Oppression, for instance—"the oppression of unwanted attention" (Gerber 44) that disabled people often experience—is transformed into freedom and display. These disturbances inevitably affect the traditional genres the novel borrows from: detective fiction and the coming-of-age novel.[13] While the beginning of the book challenges the narrator's innocence or ignorance ("I am a carnival barker" [MB 1]), a conventional characteristic of the young hero in the coming-of-age novel, the end questions any real development on his part—as suggested by the concluding allusion to Bailey. As for detective fiction, the first distortion of the genre lies in choosing Lionel, a "laughably unsuited" Touretter, according to Peacock (69), as hero detective investigating the murder of his mentor, himself a crook posing as a private detective.

Grotesque Generic Manipulations

14 "[Lethem] dismisses the idea of *Motherless Brooklyn* as noir, calling it 'just crime novel' while also admitting the possibility that it is 'a Bildungsroman, a family romance, a coming-of-age story, whatever,'" writes Matthew Luter (31).[14] In other words, Lethem brings together the old and the new, the neuronovel with two more traditional genres. This strategy, however, is not specific to Lethem: "in terms of genre," Jason Tougaw writes, many neuronovels "are revisionist mysteries, wrapped in conventions of detective fiction but revising these conventions in fundamental ways" (336). John Wray's *Lowboy* (2009) is a good example: a neuronovel, it is also a detective story and a coming-of-age novel, but it significantly revises the conventions of both.[15]

15 As far as detective fiction is concerned, Lethem adheres, "at least diegetically, to the conventions of a popular genre traditionally associated with powerful evocations of place (one thinks of Chandler's Los Angeles and Rankin's Edinburgh)" (Peacock 68). However, he also significantly distorts the traditional generic framework, thus offering a deconstruction of detective conventions, particularly as far as the narrator-sleuth is concerned.

> Not a professional sleuth by a long shot, the Tourettic detective is unable to master many of the basic techniques of the profession of urban, hardboiled detection. Tailing or discrete shadowing is impossible due to his tics and echolalia symptoms. Womanizing in order to gain information about suspects (and in order to bolster the detective's ego / manhood—these two activities are synonymous for many hardboiled detectives) is not feasible because of the stigmata of Tourette's symptoms often being misinterpreted as freakishness (cf. Lionel's nickname "The Human Freakshow") or imbecility. Violence and coercion [are] not even a possible strategy, thanks to the erratic behaviour of the Tourettic body, more likely to throw away a gun than to wield it with any form of accuracy. (Sørensen 4)

However, Lionel can also show some surprising aptitude at investigation—thus exposing the limits of Peacock's and Sørensen's interpretations: "Coney and the other Minna Agency operatives loved doing stakeouts with me, since my compulsiveness forced me to eyeball the site or mark in question every thirty seconds or so, thereby, saving them the trouble of swiveling their necks" (MB 4). Lionel's pathological vigilance, for instance, can prove an invaluable advantage, a major challenge to the negative perception of disability.

16 Besides, Lionel not only portrays himself as grotesque but also his friends, the "Minna Men": "oversize, undereducated, vibrant with hostility even with tear streaks all over our beefy faces" (MB 35). Here he no longer stands out because of his syndrome; on the contrary, he insists on the group's connection through Frank Minna, and their grotesque resemblance—they are all a cross between adults and children, a combination of physical strength and emotional weakness. When Tony, one of them, pokes fun at Lionel calling him "Marlowe" (MB 178), "invoking Chandler's fictional hero as the ideal detective whose example Lionel could never match" (Luter 35), or labelling him "Mike fucking Hammer"[16] (MB 179), on the one hand, he debases Lionel and underlines Lionel's identity as a freak, that is, "essentially a fraudulent figure" (Garland Thomson, 1996 14). On the other hand, Tony asserts the revisionist, even parodic dimension of the novel. But parody here does not refer to "the purely formalist literary parody of modern times, which has a solely negative character." It is the Bakhtinian parody characterized by "regenerating ambivalence" (Bakhtin, 1984 21)—in

other words, a homage to and a revision or rewriting of the conventional genre. Under such conditions, Fleissner is right to say that

> one tends to forget the supposed "main narrative" of *Motherless Brooklyn* in the intervals between rereadings. Who killed Minna again? Why did they do it? These puzzles are generic ones; the text achieves its distinctiveness, by contrast, in its proliferation of Lionel's verbal tics. [...] The linguistic flights are what the reader remembers: the red herrings, as it were, not the answer to the mystery. (390)

Lionel's tics are so obtrusive and intrusive that the mystery to be solved is indeed pushed into the background. Similarly, suspense hardly ever derives from any expectation of trouble or danger, but from the expectation of Lionel's ill-timed tics instead. As for the bad guy who repeatedly threatens Lionel's life, he, too, suggests a freak, for instance when Lionel is discovered in the zendo: "I opened my eyes and turned to see the Polish giant *standing* in the entrance to the sitting-room, *filling* the doorway with his square shoulders, *holding* in his fist a plastic produce bag full of kumquats and *gazing* at the roomful of Zen practitioners with an expression of absolute and utter serenity" (MB 198, my emphasis). While the character is bigger than life ("giant," "filling the doorway"), he holds food in his hand instead of a gun, and looks more serene than threatening. The balanced structure of the sentence with four -ing forms emphasizes the grotesque dimension: while the first two suggest danger, the last two in contrast convey a sense of casualness and peace. As Lionel embodies a parodic version of the sleuth, the so-called "giant" represents a parodic version of the bad guy. Especially, Lionel needs one hundred and thirty pages to realize that he might be "a detective on a case" (MB 132)—and this "might be Lethem's single most clever subversion of the hard-boiled tradition" (Luter 37). Not to mention Lionel's revelation at the end of the book that "he ha[s] never fired a gun" (MB 281). Eventually, the evocation of Lionel's apartment[17] confirms what the novel is concerned with: a deconstruction of the detective figure by the freak and the freakshow he is putting on.

17 While the traditional detective is doing his job, Lionel is doing his best to play a role, as shown in the following passage:

> Minna Men wear suits. Minna Men drive cars. Minna Men listen to tapped lines. Minna Men stand behind Minna, hands in their pockets. Minna Men collect money. Minna Men don't ask questions. Minna Men answer phones. Minna Men pick up packages. Minna Men are clean-shaven. Minna Men follow instructions. Minna Men try to be like Minna, but Minna is dead. (MB 90)

In an analysis of the extract, Luter insists that "Lionel is performing the received standard role of 'private detective,' filtered through Chandler, Hammett, and Bogart. Everything in the paragraph's description of the ideal Minna Man is exterior: appearances and actions, with no room for interiority or actual lived identity" (Luter 36). However, what the excerpt also suggests is a loss of any reliable referent—the more signifiers (hence the long anaphoric enumeration), the less signified—now that Minna is dead. In other words, Lionel needs "to appeal to the fictional characters who serve as his models for how to perform the role of detective" (Luter 38). Once again, Lionel does not look for referents in the world of reality but in other popular fictional worlds.

18 Another major distortion of the genre of crime fiction is the recurrent intrusion into the narrative of meta-generic comments on the detective tradition, such as:

> Have you ever felt, in the course of reading a detective novel, a guilty thrill of relief at having a character murdered before he can step onto the page and burden you with his actual existence? Detective stories always have too many characters

> anyway. And characters mentioned early on but never sighted, just lingering offstage, take on an awful portentous quality. Better to have them gone. (MB 119)

For Sørensen, this generic reflexivity is evidence of Lethem's "strikingly fresh contribution" (3) to the genre. For Peacock, "such generalizing moments [...] participate in a debate central to the novel, between generic representativeness and uniqueness, between wide-reaching metaphorical applications of conditions such as Tourette's and individual lived experience of those conditions" (69). Neither of them, however, mentions the novel as parody[18]—in the Bakhtinian sense—nor Lionel's ability to change roles and break barriers. As he plays both the freak and the freakshow lecturer, he can also play both the detective in the narrative and the commentator of the (detective) narrative. In other words, this strategy is consistent with his borderline position. Besides, in the comments, Lionel does not tic but presents himself as an expert reader, thus asserting his potential once again. His purpose is clarified in the last meta-generic comment at the end of the novel:

> Assertions are common to me, and they are also common to detectives [...]. And in detective stories things are always *always*, the detective casting his exhausted, caustic gaze over the corrupted permanence of everything and thrilling you with his generalizations. [...] Assertions and generalizations are, of course, a version of Tourette's. A way of touching the world, handling it, covering it with confirming language. (MB 307).

Here, Lionel finally asserts his identity as a stereotypical detective hero not because of any special ability, but because of his disability—thus confirming the paradigmatic shift of disability from stigma to asset.[19] While the meta-generic comments symbolize his freedom from generic and narrative conventions, disability turns into a means of liberation from traditional representation.

19 And not only is the generic framework of crime fiction disturbed, but the conventions of the coming-of-age novel are equally distorted, and deliberately so, as suggested by the allusion to Salinger (MB 214). Peacocks writes:

> The second chapter of Lethem's novel (simply called "Motherless Brooklyn") thus incorporates within its ongoing detective narrative a coming-of-age story as Lionel finds in Court Street a place to establish his identity and discover his own unique mode of expression. It is a deliberately perverse *Bildungsroman*, however. Whereas a common trajectory of such narratives describes an emergence into maturity characterized by the sublimation of youthful, instinctive and dangerous impulses, Lionel's arrival into adulthood, synonymous with his arrival into "the only Brooklyn" (56), represents the flowering of instinctive impulses that, in any other location, might be considered dangerously anti-social. (Peacock 70)

However, some clarification may be useful. The coming-of-age novel is often concerned with a young hero building their identity through a journey and chance meetings with adults, who are supposed to teach them lessons about life. This basic pattern is present in famous American standards of the genre such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. In his 2007 *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, Kenneth Millard writes that "an important issue in the coming-of-age novel is the way in which finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father. [...] Coming of age is thus a drama of coming to terms with the father, and with all the social and cultural governance for which he stands" (Millard 15).

20 Lionel is an orphan and at the beginning of the novel he loses his adopted father figure: Lionel does not start a quest for his origin but for his surrogate father's murderer instead. As for the main journey, it only begins incidentally in the last third of the book (MB 249) as he is following his giant suspect following Tony on the highway. To begin

with, Lionel appears to be the invisible follower he has always been. However, the journey becomes increasingly significant, first, when Lionel confesses that "[he's] never been this far from New York" and then when, understanding where Tony is heading for, he decides to drop the pursuit and "take the lead" (MB 253). The grotesque metamorphosis he fantasizes immediately afterward may foreshadow his own transformation: "The highway driving had begun to inspire a Tourettic fantasy, that the hoods and fenders of the cars were shoulders and collars I couldn't touch" (MB 254). As he is driving, Lionel also calls some Essrog family whose number he has found in the New York phone book (MB 261); even if he does not talk to them but merely tics, the identity quest is significantly brought to the foreground on that occasion.

21 Especially, Lionel's arrival in Maine, that is, his first discovery of the original world of nature, suggests some grotesque epiphany—Lionel starts by peeing—with an intense experience of loss and disorientation:

> I was off the page now, away from the grammar of skyscrapers and pavement. I experienced it precisely as a loss of language, a great sucking away of the word-laden walls that I needed around me, that I touched everywhere, leaned on for support, cribbed from when I ticced aloud. Those walls of language had always been in place, I understood now, audible to me until the sky in Maine deafened them with a shout of silence. I staggered, put one hand on the rocks to steady myself. I needed to reply in some *new tongue*, to find a way to assert a *self* that had become tenuous, shrunk to a shred of Brooklyn stumbling on the coastal void. (MB 264, my emphasis)

The passage actually echoes the beginning of the novel when Lionel explains that "it was Minna who brought [him] the language, Minna and Court Street that let [him] speak" (MB 37). In Maine, by contrast, Lionel is confronted with a metaphoric loss of urban references ("the grammar of skyscrapers and pavement") and, thereby, a loss of language itself. Whereas New York was buzzing with noise and people, in Maine he is first faced with solitude and the silence of nature. He may well shout "Freakshow!" "Bailey!" "Eat me! Dickweed," his favorite tics, but, as he says, "nothing" happens. He thus tries "Essrog!"—a significant return to himself (MB 264-265). In other words, he has to find "a new tongue," that is, a new self, but Tourette's and his tics remain his major reference.

22 Lionel's visit to Maine is then structured around two major meetings: first, a violent encounter with the giant killer; next, a heuristic conversation with Julia, Frank Minna's widow. Lionel is confronted with the giant killer in a grotesque David-against-Goliath contest, each of them armor-clad in their cars, with a parking lot as a battlefield (MB 280-283). Lionel is thus given his first opportunity to embody the heroic detective of his dreams, risking his life for justice, and winning the fight—which brings forth new evidence of his empowerment. As for the meeting with Julia afterwards, it consists of a short climactic chapter in the novel (MB 286-303) leading to a full clarification of Frank Minna's murder. However, the chapter stands apart from the rest since over several pages the first-person is replaced by the third-person narrative (MB 286-292), allowing Lionel and his tics to disappear for a while, as do the names of the characters: Julia is referred to as "the girl from Nantucket" and the Minna brothers as "the older brother" and "the younger brother." While the passage begins as a fairy tale—"There once was a girl from Nantucket" (MB 286)—it ends on a grotesque distortion of the American Dream, with the concluding word play highly suggestive of a Tourettic tic: "the men of Fujisaki hoped to do a little 'business.' New York City: land of opportunity for monks

and crooks and mooks alike" (MB 292). Like the meta-generic comments on detective fiction, this chapter represents a sort of counterpoint, where Lionel asserts both his flexibility and his freedom from narrative and generic consistency.

23 The short, last chapter of the novel comes as a sort of epilogue to both the detective novel and the coming-of-age narrative: Lionel has solved the mystery of Frank Minna's death, the Minna Men's family has been restored, despite the deaths of Tony and Frank, and order, even honesty, now seem to prevail: "L&L was a detective agency, a clean one for the first time. So clean we didn't have any clients" (MB 306). But the last alliterative sentence debunks the happy ending and casts doubts over Lionel's future. However, Lionel's Jewish family name (Essrog)[20] and his preference, at the very end of the novel, for a "kosher-food stand [...] run by a family of Israelis" (MB 310) over the White Castle burgers of the beginning[21] (MB 2) have led Sørensen to identify "a potential identity trajectory for Lionel that can somewhat stabilize his past and set him on a more meaningful future path as well." Sørensen even suggests "forget[ting] about the apparent case which needs solving (the murder of Minna) and instead set[ting] out to work on the far more interesting case of Lionel Essrog" (Sørensen 8-9). Lionel's quest for identity may be a major trend in the narrative, it is nonetheless grotesquely undermined right from the beginning when Lionel explains that he is a freak who got his education from a "tomblike library" (MB 37).

24 What is more interesting, however, is the association of two traditional genres with the "new" neuronovel. At first sight, *Motherless Brooklyn* may be less "neuro-" than most, considering the near absence of neurological vocabulary, but the narrator's condition is obsessively mentioned and always grotesquely represented throughout the book, to such an extent that it distorts the conventional endings both of the crime novel and the coming-of-age story. At the end of his conversation with Julia, when the mystery has just been solved, Lionel significantly throws away two guns, a beeper and a cell phone into the sea, but he suddenly needs something else to throw away considering his obsession with counting to five: hence, in a grotesque gesture, he throws one of his shoes too and drives back to New York with one shoe on (MB 302-303). As for his quest for identity, he may call up all the Essrogs in the Brooklyn phone book, but he never speaks to any of the Essrogs answering the phone, and never interprets these unsuccessful communication attempts any further: he merely tics on the phone as if he refused to go further in his identity quest and preferred to stick to his syndrome instead.

25 The display of Lionel's tics represents one of the major enfreakment[22] strategies in the novel. However, this enfreakment is deliberately achieved by the narrator-Touretter as he never stands in the marginal position usually associated with disabled people. In contrast, he is always centerstage manipulating language and meaning through jokes and word play—as exemplified by the last words of the book, "Tell your story walking" (MB 311). Since they introduce double entendre or merely semantic instability, they subvert the traditional meaning of words and suggest new semantic possibilities. Grotesque images play a somewhat similar role: as they mostly rely on degradation, they question conventional representation and categories.

Grotesque Language and Laughter

26 In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains that the grotesque "degrades [and] brings down to earth" but, he adds, "degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (20-21). Degradation, therefore, is ambivalent.

27 In the novel, degradation is especially perceptible whenever Lionel uses images to refer to himself and his condition. In the opening pages, for instance, he describes ticcing as follows: "Of course after any talk my brain was busy with at least some low-level version of echolalia salad" (MB 4). The metaphoric association of "echolalia" and "salad" is all the more debasing because of the derogatory "low-level" and the insistent sound effects. Later, Lionel compares his body to "an overwound watchspring, effortlessly driving one set of hands double-time while feeling it could as easily animate an entire mansion of stopped clocks, or a vast factory mechanism" (MB 47). Picturing himself as some grotesque automaton, with the portmanteau word "watchspring" emphasizing the process of metamorphosis, may seem to be utterly degrading at first sight; however, the "watchspring" Lionel mentions is also presented as capable of "animating an entire mansion of stopped clocks," that is, of possessing enough energy to bring them back to life. In other words, Lionel's image is completely ambivalent and, thereby, reminiscent of Bakhtin's description of the grotesque image: one "indispensable trait [of the grotesque image] is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating" (1984 24). The same ambivalence is to be found more specifically in Lionel's animal imagery—not to mention his figurative first name, etymologically young lion: "I chanted, like a cricket trapped in a wall" (MB 261); "I made a sound, half dog, half cat" (MB 218). No matter how degrading at first sight, both images actually break the border between men and animals; the second even generates a sort of hybrid—a freak of nature and not of culture.

28 Lionel especially uses grotesque images involving a personification of Tourette's. The syndrome is Lionel's "muse" (MB 15) and when he is questioned by a detective, for instance, he thinks: "Let Tourette be the suspect and maybe I'd get off the hook" (MB 110). In both cases, Lionel's condition is especially turned into an advantage—with Tourette's as a source of inspiration and protection. Lionel's laughter, therefore, is neither the corrosive laughter of the satirist nor the derisive laughter of the ironist (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11-12): it is the laughter of comedy. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn explains that narrative comedy has two major characteristics: antiauthoritarianism, and renewal and social transformation. Antiauthoritarianism derives from comedy's "attacks on the Law of the Father and drive to level, disrupt and destroy hierarchy [...]. Comedy breaks taboos and expresses those impulses that are outside social norms. Where comedy is, so are food, sex, excrement, blasphemy [...]" (Karlyn 158). As comedy involves a challenge to social hierarchy and cultural rules, it can bring about a significant paradigmatic transformation. In the novel, comedy is used hand in hand with the grotesque to unsettle the representation of disability.

29 Grotesque images, however, are not merely used to refer to Lionel, but they are recurrent in the narrative, so that degradation is widespread and, in the end, creates a new form of ontological equality. For instance, when he is in the car with Coney following Minna and his abductors, Lionel says: "we both turned our heads like cartoon

mice spotting a cat" (MB 20). While all these images create comic effects, they also suggest ambivalence, metamorphosis and hyperbolization. Hyperbole, a recurrent characteristic of Lionel's speech—and of the freakshow lecturer's pitch—represents the exaggeration of caricature, with the descriptions of the giant killer as a case in point. Metamorphosis stands for a rejection of fixity and completion, and Lionel's grotesque body is a major example. There are others, however, for instance, Lionel's description of the Japanese in the Maine restaurant: "Others unfolded the spiny menu and began to grunt as well, to jabber and laugh and stab their manicured fingers at the laminated photographs of fish inside" (MB 276). While all the Japanese make animal sounds that are emphasized by the enumeration and polysyndeton, their "manicured fingers" suggest refinement and create a grotesque contrast. Metaphorically, therefore, they become both gross animals and refined humans, that is, grotesque hybrids, highly reminiscent of comics characters. According to Bakhtin, grotesque images are "ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (1984 25). Through the use of degrading images and their regenerating power, therefore, Lionel challenges the border between disabled and abled people, humans and animals, popular culture (comics) and literature as well.

30 As for Lionel's tics, particularly coprolalia—that is, involuntary swearing or the involuntary utterance of obscene words—they both create comic effects and suggest that "verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed" (Bakhtin, 1984 16). The recurrent, but not systematic, use of italics to emphasize Lionel's verbal tics dramatizes this strategy of liberation—from typographic and narrative rules as well. Bakhtin also writes that "profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter, but they were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms" (1984 17). The multiple evocations of Lionel's tics, therefore, break the norms of conventionally serious narratives and use laughter as a means of transgression and liberation.

31 In his essay on "Humor," a landmark contribution to the conception of laughter as healing strategy, Freud writes that "the essence of humor is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest. Humor, therefore, "has something liberating about it," it is "the ego's assertion of its own invulnerability" (162) and "a means to ward off possible suffering" (164). The power of humor is perceptible on several occasions, particularly when Lionel finds himself in trouble. For instance, in the zendo, after he has been discovered, he says: "Kimmery put her hand on my knee and I put my hand on hers, reciprocity-ticcing" (MB 202). Or when Tony threatens him with a gun: "Tony held the gun floppily between us, using it to gesture, to signal punctuation. I only hoped he understood how literally it could punctuate" (MB 184). The second example is all the more significant since Lionel is not ticcing, but rather coping with his fear. It also exemplifies his recurrent penchant for word play: "his ability to transform names into nicknames ('Leshawn Montrose' can thus become permutated via 'Shefawn Mongoose' and 'Lefthand Moonprose' to 'Fuckyou Roseprawn' [47] which can be extremely telling of the character of the person behind the name" (Sørensen 6). Lionel's "verbal taffy," as he calls it (MB 7), may thus be more meaningful than first meets the eye.[23] "The spoonerist facet of TS functions particularly well with Lionel's own name, ('Lionel, my name. Frank and the Minna Men pronounced it to rhyme with

vinyl. Lionel Essrog. *Line-all.* Liable Guesscog. Final Escrow. Ironic Pissclam. And so on' [7])" (Sørensen 6)—with "escrow" a significant allusion to his freak mask.

32 For Lionel, laughter is a means of resistance and self-assertion that can change the whole perception of disability. His taste for jokes, for instance, is one of the reasons for Frank Minna's attachment: "Minna and I had been in a joke-telling contest since I was thirteen years old, primarily because he liked to see me try to get through without ticcing" (MB 25). While Lethem is concerned with the politics of disability, he is equally keen on literary experimentation. At first sight, Roth's assertion that Lionel's Tourette "justifies or excuses the freewheeling language of its creator" and "his experimental impulses" (Roth) may sound true. Nevertheless, Sørensen has noticed "the interplay between Tourettic language on the character / narrator level (i.e. language which in the fictional world is produced by Lionel) and paratextual language such as chapter titles (obviously produced by the author without being filtered through a narrator)" (Sørensen 6). While the novel is conventionally divided into nine chapters, each with a specific title, "the chapter titles [...] all consist of two words, and many read like fragments of larger syntactical units ('Walks Into,' 'Formerly Known'). Others are punning and laden with double meaning ('Bad Cookies' and 'Auto Body')" (Sørensen 6-7)—not to mention "One Mind." In other words, it is not just Lionel who is witty. So is Lethem. He pretends to follow literary conventions—using chapters and chapter titles, for instance—in order to distort them all the better so that his novel ends up resembling his freak narrator's narrative. Laughter, therefore, is used as a strategy of renewal, of both social and literary transformation.

Conclusion

33 "A merry heart doeth good *like* a medicine" (Proverbs 17:22)—the healing power of laughter has been long acknowledged. As it can put fear, even pain, at a distance, not only is it a coping strategy but it is also a means of resistance—Frank Minna's request for jokes when he is seriously wounded is a good illustration. However, it is true that "laughter rarely alters actual material conditions" (Morson and Emerson 453), let alone neurological conditions. Lionel may have solved the murder of his mentor and got a better sense of his identity at the end of the novel, but he remains forever a Touretter, as suggested by the return to Bailey on the very last page.

34 But other subversive strategies are also used throughout the novel. The most powerful no doubt consists in Lionel presenting himself as a grotesque freak and turning the novel into his own freakshow. Not only does Lethem give a voice to the freak, but he also takes advantage of the stereotype to deconstruct it all the better. The Touretter takes center stage as narrator and leader of the show. Hence, Tourette's is no longer rejected as an anomaly, a sign of inferiority, but accepted, even recognized as potential, even a privilege. The novel thus achieves a significant paradigm shift, with disability a benefit and no longer a blemish. As for the dramatic display of Lionel's tics, it generates a bold, innovative narrative.

35 The last lines of the novel, a final address to the reader and three metaphoric jokes, confirm Lionel's pleasurable independence from social and literary conventions. As a conclusion to the book, they may also suggest a philosophy of life that is reminiscent of Bakhtin's: "[laughter] has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a

peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint." Laughter introduces an "unofficial truth" that can free people from the power "of all that oppresses and restricts" (Bakhtin, 1984 66, 92). It has an individual, social and political dimension as well.[24]

36 This process of liberation and renewal is perceptible at the level of genres, too. Lethem combines new and old genres, questions their conventions and transgresses their limits. But this strategy "has not only a destructive, negative aspect but also a regenerating one." It turns his novel into parody with "regenerating ambivalence" (Bakhtin, 1984 21). However, it is no doubt Lionel's extensive use of grotesque images, jokes and word play that contribute to deconstructing the representation of people with disability because of the semantic instability they produce. Not only does he break categories, but he undercuts the belief that disabled people would be too desperate to use humor, let alone the grotesque, at their own expense—thus adding degradation to degradation.

37 In his book, *The Ritual Process* (1969), anthropologist Victor Tuner explains that "it is the marginal or 'inferior' person or the 'outsider' who often comes to symbolize what David Hume has called 'the sentiment for humanity'" (111) or "'humankindness,' a sense of the generic social bond between all members of society" (Turner 116). Lethem's use of Lionel as narrator and provocative portrayal of the Tourettor as a freak prove to be powerful means of questioning traditional beliefs and prejudices about disability, in particular the conventional interpretation of corporeal difference as deviance. Ultimately, while the novel certainly contributes to revitalizing illness literature, it also provides a powerful testimony that a mere paradigm shift can go a long way towards creating a widely different perception of disability.

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NOTES

1. *Motherless Brooklyn* will be referred to as MB throughout this article.
2. For a thorough historical analysis of Tourette's, see Kushner.
3. Lethem's novel is mentioned by Roth together with Ian McEwan's Enduring Love and Saturday, Mark Haddon's Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Richard Powers's The Echomaker, Rivka Galchen's Atmospheric Disturbances and John Wray's Lowboy.
4. *Motherless Brooklyn*, for instance, was adapted to the cinema by Edward Norton (with Edward Norton in the leading role) and released in 2019.
5. Possibly John M. Berecz's *Understanding Tourette's Syndrome: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder & Related Problems* (1991).
6. This phrase was borrowed from the title of chapter two in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*.

7. A parallel could also be drawn with the court jesters mentioned by Max Gluckman in *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*: Jesters were "usually men of low class [...] who clearly moved out of their usual estate. Normally they were entitled to mock at anyone in the midst of their tales and jokes. [...] In a system where it was difficult for others to rebuke the head of a political unit, we might have here an institutionalized joker, operating at the highest point of the unit [...] a joker able to express outraged morality" (102-103).

8. The other great theoretician of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser, is concerned with a darker version—exemplified by Kafka and Poe among others. In his famous book, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, he defines the grotesque as the "structure of estrangement" (183) and writes that "the grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death" (185).

9. The identity of Bailey or Billy, the reason for his recurrent intrusions throughout the novel, is presented as a mystery—like a grotesque secondary plot—that the narrator detective cannot solve. It remains so down to the end since Bailey is mentioned again on the very last page of the novel.

10. Interestingly, the joke is told as Lionel and one of his friends are taking Minna to the hospital. Minna has been shot, is severely wounded, and literally asking for comic relief to ease his pain. Lionel's tics, therefore, only add to a situation that is already grotesque as it associates imminent death with laughter.

11. This identity between Lionel's brain and the world is asserted in very similar terms both earlier and later in the narrative: "Tourette's is just one big lifetime of tag, really. The world (or my brain—same thing) appoints me *it*, again and again. So I tag back" (MB 6); "The world (my brain) is too full of dull men, dead men" (MB 311).

12. Several characters occasionally can bear some resemblance with Lionel: Frank Minna, his murdered mentor, is one of them. "No stranger to verbal extravagances himself (he excoriates his henchmen variously as 'you boiled cabbageheads,' 'you candied yams,' 'you chocolate cheesepuffs' [24, 172, 60]), Minna is also someone who 'saw drolleries everywhere,' who enjoys (with a leavening of disgust) 'the spectrum of human comedy' for its own sake (85)" (Fleissner 391). In his book, *Understanding Lethem* (2015), Mathew Luter also mentions the doorman (32): "I waved good-bye and he waved back involuntarily—everyone's a little ticcish that way sometimes" (MB 160).

13. I chose the phrase coming-of-age novel over *bildungsroman* following Kenneth Millard's title *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*. Despite the semantic differences between the two labels, for the sake of simplicity, they will be considered mere synonyms in this essay.

14. For a thorough analysis of the influences on Lethem's works, see Matthew Luter's *Understanding Lethem*, particularly chapter 2 that is concerned with *Motherless Brooklyn*. Here Luter quotes Lethem in Clarke (35-36).

15. For an analysis on John Wray's *Lowboy*, see Antolin.

16. An allusion to the detective in American author Mickey Spillane's 1947 *I, the Jury* and the Mike Hammer TV series.

17. For a more detailed analysis of Lionel's apartment, see Luter (35-36).

18. Sørensen calls Lethem's novel a "pastiche" (3) of the detective novel, that is, a form of hypertextuality and, more specifically, an imitative technique without any satiric intent (Genette 40).

19. Stigma was first theorized by sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1963 *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*.

20. "[...] investigation into the origin and meaning of the name "Essrog" leads to the Jewish ritual for the celebration for the fall harvest festival of Sukkoth, in which the essrog (the more frequent spelling is "esrog" with a single "s," or even more commonly "etrog") features prominently. [...] The qualities of the esrog fruit (of the citron family, and considered especially difficult to grow)

also bears upon a potential characterization device used by Lethem to clue the reader into Lionel's true nature" (Sørensen 8).

21. The recurrent allusions to food bear further evidence to the grotesque dimension of the novel (Bakhtin, 1984 18, 303).

22. The word was coined by David Hevey (53).

23. For an analysis of Lionel's specific use of language, see Schleifer.

24. Even though Bakhtin has also been criticized for his enthusiastic optimism.

ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes Jonathan Lethem's neuronovel, *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque and laughter. The specificity of the novel lies the first-person narrator and leading character suffering from Tourette's syndrome and appropriating the nickname "freak of nature" he was given as a child. Thereby, he plays a double role: he is both "the grotesque freak" exhibited on the platform / page, and the freakshow talker constructing the freak from his condition. The novel turns into a freakshow, not in the sense of the sordid spectacle of the past, but as a construction questioning both the social and the literary order. Through the grotesque and laughter, Lethem challenges the traditional representation of disability—and the stereotype of the disabled person—and also the major genres his novel borrows from: detective fiction and the coming-of-age narrative. The book turns into parody, in the Bakhtinian sense, i.e., both a homage to and a rewriting of traditional genres. Lethem also takes advantage of his narrator's symptomatic verbal outbursts and penchant for grotesque images and word play to shift disability paradigm—turning stigma into asset—and revitalize illness literature.

Cet article propose une lecture de *Motherless Brooklyn*, publié par Jonathan Lethem en 1999, à la lumière de la théorie bakhtinienne du grotesque et du rire. L'originalité du roman tient à sa mise en fiction du syndrome de Gilles de la Tourette dont souffre le personnage principal, également narrateur à la première personne, qui s'approprie délibérément le surnom « phénomène de cirque » dont il a été affublé dans son enfance. Ainsi ce héros-narrateur joue un double rôle tout le long du récit : il est à la fois le phénomène grotesque qu'on exhibe sur le stand de foire, et celui qui exhibe et construit le phénomène en baratinant le public / lecteur. Lethem, de cette façon, remet en cause tant la représentation traditionnelle du handicap (et le stéréotype du handicapé) que les principaux genres dont s'inspire le roman : fiction policière et récit de formation. Le texte se fait parodie, au sens bakhtinien du terme, à la fois hommage à ces genres traditionnels et réécriture de ceux-ci. Lethem, enfin, utilise à la fois les tics et autres vocalisations symptomatiques du héros et son penchant pour les images grotesques et le rire, afin d'opérer un changement paradigmatique et transformer le stigmate en atout. Le romancier contribue ainsi à renouveler significativement la fiction consacrée à la maladie.

INDEX

Keywords: Lethem (Jonathan), neuronovel, Tourette’s, freak, freakshow, disability, grotesque, laughter, Bakhtin (Mikhail), detective fiction, coming-of-age novel
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